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AUTHOR Dore, Betty; Jackson, Janet
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the affects of sexual harassment on middle schools and discusses what can be done to prevent it. This paper suggests that school personnel must educate students about sexual harassment, and videos can be a particularly effective way to do this. Recent studies have shown that 81 percent of all students, grades 8 through 11, experience sexual harassment, which can originate from other students, both males and females, or from educators themselves. Sexual harassment is not about sex. Rather, it is about power; harassers like to have their own way and they make sure that others are afraid of them. This situation is exacerbated by the signals that girls receive from the advertising and entertainment industries, which often portray women as sex objects who dress up to receive attention, be it unwanted or not. Research has shown that sexual harassment affects the victim in five principal areas: physically, emotionally, in school performance and experiences, in both their immediate and later futures, and in job-related situations. Prevention is important and one way to ensure awareness of sexual harassment is through speakers, classes, and seminars. (RJM)

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SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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Dr. Betty Dore
Radford University
Radford, VA

Janet Jackson
Christiansburg Middle School
Christiansburg, VA

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SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Sexual harassment is not only happening in corporate offices and at construction sites around the world. Sexual harassment is taking place in hallways, between classes, after school, before school, during lunch and in classrooms every day. Sexual harassment can be remarks, staring, touching, gestures, and/or propositions. Sexual harassment prevents students from learning. Sexual harassment is boys harassing girls, boys harassing boys, girls harassing girls, and girls harassing boys. It is also teachers and administrator harassing students as well as their colleagues. Sexual harassment is "any unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature." Two other important definitions are quid pro quo, a Latin term meaning if you do something for me, I'll do something for you; and hostile educational environment which translates into "any sexually-oriented conduct or sexually-oriented atmosphere that is intimidating or offensive to a reasonable person." Sexual harassment is illegal. Middle schools need to be places where students feel safe and where they know they are cared for. Middle level students need to have opportunities "to achieve and maintain healthy minds and bodies and to understand their own growth." This cannot be done if they are constantly in a state of fear and agitation from their peers and/or teachers.

Sexual harassment usually appears in one of three forms: physical harassment, verbal harassment and/or non-verbal harassment. When a person does not respect another's "space," and stands too close or prevents that person from leaving a room, that is physical harassment. Or, when someone is constantly bumping into others or

brushing up against them on purpose, that too is physical harassment. Telling sexual jokes or stories, writing notes and letters and making sexual remarks and suggestions would be classified as verbal sexual harassment, where making suggestive body movements, staring or drawing sexual pictures would be classified as non-verbal sexual harassment. All of these actions are still sexual harassment and are still illegal.

There are several questions which need to be asked and considered to make middle level schools safe for students. Do your students know sexual harassment when they see it or when it is happening to them? Are your students struggling to come to school for fear it will happen to them again? How are you and your co-teachers handling sexual harassment? Do students recognize they are committing sexual harassment?

One way to be sure students know what sexual harassment is and when it is happening to them is through education. There are several videos available for teachers to use in the classroom. Two excellent examples are Sexual Harassment: It's hurting people produced by the National Middle School Association, and Sexual harassment and schools produced by the National Education Association-Teacher TV. In each of those presentations, statistics, causes, effects and consequences, and legalities are addressed in a clear and understandable format. The characters in the videos are represented by middle level students and are very realistic and believable. When students can see scenarios of actions and reactions that are happening to them every day, they begin to realize what is and what is not sexual harassment.

In 1997, Judith Brandenburg reported on the results of a study at Cornell University which found when the abusers were males (96%), 76% abused females and 24% abused males. When the abusers were females, 86% abused females and 14%

abused males. In 1993, the American Association of University Women reported that "81% of all students, grade eight through eleven, experience sexual harassment."

In 1992, Susan Strauss, when reporting on who was doing the harassing, students-59%, teachers-30%, administrators-9%, with 2% by "others." Sexual harassment incidents experienced were remarks -73%, staring-59%, touch-59%, gestures-52%, propositions-7%, and "other" 9%. During class was when 68% of the harassment allegedly occurred, with between classes 66%, after school 28%, with after school, before school, and during lunch finishing out the times harassment occurred. Understandably, therefore, 71% of the incidents reportedly occurred in the classroom, with 67% occurring in the hallways. Other localities included the cafeteria and the auditorium. Sixty-nine percent reported they ignored the harassment, while other victims stated they hit the harasser, changed classes, reported it to the principal, talked to the harasser, talked to the teacher or counselor, or missed school. Sixty-seven percent reportedly talked to a friend, with only 27% saying they talked to their parents. Victims also reported talking to their boyfriend/girlfriend, other family members, teachers, administrators, or a local agency. Is sexual harassment happening in our classrooms and hallways? If it is, what are we doing about it?

Causes:

Sexual harassment is not about sex. Sexual harassment is about power. Harassers like to have their own way and make sure others are afraid of them, sometimes even going so far as to inflict pain in others to deepen that fear. Both advertising and entertainment media often use women as sex objects, precipitating the idea that girls

should be flattered by the "attention" given them, no matter if they are confused about how they feel about the "attention." There is a certain lack of communication, leaving girls to wonder, "what part of 'no' don't you understand?" Also in the media, both written and visual, men have often been led to think of themselves as "macho" while females are portrayed as passive and submissive - especially to macho men. To add to this stereotype, there appears to be a double standard for boys and girls. "Boys will be boys" is often sexual harassment, yet is many times considered a natural happening in teens. Let it be and it will go away. The "boys" will grow up. But will they grow up to be men who are sexual harassers.

Do you know what your school policy and procedure is regarding sexual harassment? If you have a policy, do students know what it is, where it is, and what it means? Could a seventh grade student read the policy and be able to understand the verbiage? Recently an actual school sexual harassment policy was presented to a group of middle level teachers and they were asked to explain it. After some time, it was decided that the vocabulary used was difficult for them, let alone for a middle level student. Have you checked your policy lately?

What happens if a student or a teacher actually does report a sexual harassment incident? Is there follow through? What are the consequences? Many victims fail to report sexual harassment for fear of "getting in trouble." In some cases, it has actually be found that lack of follow through has resulted in victims being told to "live with it."

In 1992 Susan Strauss suggested sexual harassment affects the victim in five principal areas: physically, emotionally, in school performance and experiences, in both their immediate and later futures, and in job-related situations. Victims have become

physically ill, including changes in body weight, dependence on alcohol and other drugs, loss of appetite and eating disorders, and sleep disturbances. Low self-esteem, shame, depression, stress, withdrawal and irritability are only a few of the emotional effects. Victims often drop out of school, lose trust in both their friends and the school system and develop inappropriate behavior if they do remain in the classroom. Several losses affect sexual harassment victims in their future lives including a continued disability to trust others, and, because their school performance often suffers, so, too, do their chances of furthering their education, and obtaining recommendations for job and career opportunities, thus making a better life for themselves. If they do become employed, often these same symptoms of stress, lack of concentration, distraction, absenteeism and tardiness follow them. Victims blame themselves for the situations in which they find themselves embroiled.

Prevention:

How to stop sexual harassment in middle level schools? Education is the key. All faculty and staff of the school must be trained. This includes administrators, teachers, secretaries, maintenance personnel and any other persons who work with the students, staff or faculty. Title IX incorporates inequality in school sports programs as being a form of sexual harassment. Students as well as faculty and staff need to be made aware of gender bias in sports, support services, facilities and resources. Are there equal opportunities for girls to play sports in comparison to the opportunities for boys? Just as important in some cases, are there equal opportunities for boys to play sports in comparison to the opportunities for girls? One of the ways to insure awareness of sexual harassment is through speakers, classes, and seminars. Ask students and staff for suggestions on how to make the school environment safer for

everyone. Students need to know it is alright to speak up if they are victims of sexual harassment. Is there a liaison to whom students and staff can go if they wish to file a complaint? It is important to involve parents and the community in efforts of this nature. Finally, students and staff who become victims of sexual harassment need to know there is a support system in place which will help them if and when they need it. All students and staff need to know where and to whom to turn if even a suggestion of sexual harassment arises. Is it time to check our policies and procedures?

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